

WCES-2011

## On the integration of form and meaning in English Language Teaching (ELT): An overview of current pedagogical options

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### Abstract

English Language Teaching (ELT) researchers and practitioners now unanimously approve that the current challenge of the field lies in the integration of form and meaning and the reconciliation of explicit and implicit approaches to teaching/learning of grammar. The debate about the interaction between explicit knowledge/learning and implicit knowledge/learning is known as the ‘interface issue’ under which three different positions on teaching grammar are subsumed: the ‘non-interface’ position, the ‘strong interface’ position, and the ‘weak interface’ position. Following a brief examination of the three positions, the study focuses on the ‘weak interface’ position and provides an overview of six major pedagogical options capitalising on this integrative view:

- a) Input processing (structured input)
- b) Textual enhancement (visual/typographical enhancement)
- c) Interactional feedback
- d) Instructional conversation (prolepsis)
- e) Focused communicative tasks
- f) Discourse-based approaches

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*Keywords:* Integrative view of SLA; interface issue; non-interface position; strong interface position; weak interface position; focus-on-form

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### 1. Introduction

Recent years has witnessed a resurgence of interest in the central role of grammar in English Language Teaching (ELT). Among all the issues concerning the teaching of grammar, there has been no other issue more discussed and of relevance to SLA researchers, applied linguists, syllabus designers and practitioners than that of form-meaning interaction. In Second Language Acquisition studies, the crux of grammar-teaching enterprise is known as the ‘interface’ debate, discussing whether explicit knowledge/learning of grammatical forms converts to implicit knowledge/learning. There have been extremist views to the effect that some researchers (e.g. Krashen, 1981, 1982) have argued in favour of a ‘non-interface’ position (i.e. explicit knowledge can’t convert to implicit knowledge) and some others (e.g. DeKeyser, 1998) have supported a ‘strong interface’ position (i.e. explicit knowledge can convert to implicit knowledge). However, the criticisms levelled at both of these positions resulted in the emergence of an *integrative* view known as the ‘weak interface’ position (Ellis, 1993, 1994), suggesting that explicit knowledge can actually convert to implicit knowledge, but there are some constraints on how and when this can occur.

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The three interface positions have their own pedagogical realisations: the non-interface position advocated the *focus-on-meaning* approach to teaching grammar, the strong interface position favoured the traditional *focus-on-formS* approach (a term coined by Long, 1991), and the weak interface position posited the *focus-on-form* approach (Long, 1991). The weak interface position and its pedagogical manifestation, namely the focus-on-form instruction, are currently supported as optimal integrative solutions to the interface debate and form-meaning interaction.

The present study first addresses the form-meaning relationship and the interface issue. Then, the weak interface position and an overview of the current pedagogical options deriving from this position will be brought into focus.

## 2. Form-meaning interaction and the interface issue

The dichotomy between focusing on form and focusing on meaning can be considered the cornerstone of the current grammar teaching options and the dominant SLA theories underlying them. Three major pedagogical approaches to focusing on form/meaning have been recognised by Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2002):

- 1) Focus-on-meaning which highlights the role of *meaning* in communication and disregards the role of attention to grammatical forms
- 2) Focus-on-formS which underlines teaching grammatical *forms* rather than the meanings they convey
- 3) Focus-on-form which seeks the integration of *focus-on-meaning* and *focus-on-formS* approaches

The distinction between focus-on-form(S) and focus-on-meaning approaches to teaching grammar develops from an underlying distinction between explicit knowledge/learning and implicit knowledge/learning of grammar. Whereas the focus-on-form(S) approaches intend to foster the development of some degree of explicit knowledge of grammatical forms, the focus-on-meaning approaches emphasise the development of implicit knowledge of grammar. The distinction between explicit and implicit knowledge is central to what is known as the ‘interface issue’. The issue investigates the interaction between explicit knowledge/learning and implicit knowledge/learning and whether the former converts to or facilitates the acquisition of the latter. The three major positions on the interface issue are shortly explained in the following.

### 2.1. The non-interface position

The non-interface position generally reflected in the UG-based or symbolist (Hulstijn, 2002) views of generative SLA researchers, is evident in Krashen’s *Monitor Model* or *Input Hypothesis* (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985). Arguing in support of an innate mechanism called Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which is assumed to be responsible for both first and second language acquisition (i.e. L1=L2), Krashen posits that the structure of language is so complex that can be acquired only through a large amount of exposure to sufficient amount of comprehensible input ( $i+1$ ) which focuses on *meaning rather than form*. Based on this, the central part of instruction should address developing *implicit, meaning-based* knowledge of language and no essential role is assigned to *explicit* knowledge of language forms. More specifically, *explicit, conscious* knowledge of grammatical forms (i.e. learning) can’t convert into *implicit, unconscious* knowledge (i.e. acquisition). This dissociation of explicit knowledge from implicit knowledge has been referred to as the ‘non-interface’ position.

Giving priority to fluency over accuracy, this position assumed that knowledge of a second language should be ‘acquired’ rather than ‘learned’ because “fluency in second language performance is due to what we have acquired, not what we have learned” (Krashen, 1981: 99). Instruction should, therefore, enable learners to fluently use language without any attention to the accuracy of forms. That is why the pedagogical approaches drawing on this position, including the Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), the content-based instruction and the immersion programmes (Harley & Swain, 1984; Swain, 1985), primarily emphasised *fluency* rather than *accuracy*.

Despite the intuitive appeal of Krashen’s anti-grammar movement and its great impact on the way second language acquisition was viewed, it faced serious criticisms. The main argument against this position was presumably provoked by the immersion programmes in which learners were exposed to abundant comprehensible input which enabled them to develop a good mastery of production skills in communicative events. Nevertheless, the input merely developed learners’ *fluency* and it fell short of fostering their *accuracy*. Furthermore, it was argued

that learners need something more than comprehensible input, and that they should also produce *comprehensible output* (Swain, 1985). Later, some researchers emphasised the role of *attention* to form by asserting that “SLA is largely driven by what learners pay attention to and what they understand of the significance of the noticed input to be” (Schmidt, 2001: 3–4).

## 2.2. The (strong) interface position

The second position is both known as the ‘interface position’ and the ‘strong interface position’. Although the former term has been used more frequently, the latter is more preferable because it shows the contrast with the third position – the ‘weak interface’ position. Unlike the non-interface position which is founded on the generative perspective on SLA, the strong interface position is based on cognitive (i.e. connectionist or emergentist) models of SLA. Whereas in the former, LAD is assumed to be *accessible* for L2 *acquisition*, the latter assumes that L2 learners have *no more access* to UG and that L2 *learning* is guided by ‘general learning mechanisms’ or ‘general problem solving skills’, implying that L2 learning is much like other types of learning and has no similarity to L1 acquisition. This view (i.e.  $L1 \neq L2$ ) is well represented by the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (Bley-Vroman, 1988).

Unlike the non-interface position which aimed at developing *unconscious, implicit* knowledge of L2, the strong interface position intended to promote *Learned Linguistic Knowledge* (Schwartz, 1993) which required learners to explicitly learn L2 forms. Simply put, it was assumed that there is a direct interaction between explicit knowledge/learning and implicit knowledge/learning and that L2 learning takes place with explicit *focus-on-forms*.

Drawing upon the widely held belief that ‘practice makes perfect’, characterised as a *skill-learning theory* (DeKeyser, 1998), most advocates of this position argued that learning L2 forms is best achieved through a PPP procedure: 1) *Presenting* the targeted structure through explicit instruction, 2) *Practising* the structure until it is followed by 3) *Producing* that structure. The methodology associated with the PPP procedure evidently resembled the traditional grammar teaching in the Grammar-Translation Method, the Audiolingual Method and later versions of the oral-situational approach in which decontextualised linguistic items were taught as part of a *structural* syllabus. So, since the PPP procedure reeked of the behaviourist theories of second language learning and gave prominence to accuracy to the exclusion of fluency, the strong interface position and the focus-on-forms approach also received sharp criticisms.

## 2.3. The weak interface position

Following the same theoretical basis of the strong interface position but with a moderate view, the weak interface position was put forward by Ellis (1993, 1994). This position is based on the connectionist or emergentist (Hulstijn, 2002) theory of SLA, supporting the contention that L2 learning is guided by Learned Linguistic Knowledge (LLK) rather than an innate predisposition. The natural corollary to this is that L2 learning is different from L1 acquisition (i.e.  $L1 \neq L2$ ); hence the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (Bley-Vroman, 1988).

While in the strong interface position, explicit knowledge *directly* converts to implicit knowledge through plentiful practice, in the weak interface position explicit knowledge converts to implicit knowledge both *directly* and *indirectly*. Explicit knowledge directly changes to implicit knowledge through explicit rule presentation; besides, it is indirectly transformed to implicit knowledge through *noticing* (i.e. attention to some specific features in the input) and *noticing the gap* (i.e. comparing the targeted features in the input with existing mental grammar). The concept of ‘noticing’ has come to be known under different terms: *consciousness-raising* (Rutherford, 1987; Sharwood Smith, 1981), *focus on form* (Long, 1991), *attention* (Schmidt, 1993, 2001), *awareness* (James & Garrett, 1991) and *input enhancement* (Sharwood Smith, 1991, 1993).

The type of instruction based on this position is commonly known as the *focus-on-form* instruction (Long, 1991). This approach to teaching grammar aims at drawing learners’ attention to some specific linguistic form through *saliency* or *frequency* of that form during meaning-based instruction or when form-based problems incidentally arise in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication. So, it is claimed that both *form* and *meaning*, both *explicit* and *implicit* knowledge/learning and both *accuracy* and *fluency* are all simultaneously taken into account and that is how the criticisms against the former extremist positions are accommodated.

### 3. The weak interface position and the relevant pedagogical options

The different positions on the interface issue have all their proponents and have been the topic of long-standing controversies in the SLA literature. However, the bulk of available evidence obtained from empirical inquiry suggest the superiority of the ‘weak interface’ position over its predecessors. The following are some of the major research lines and pedagogical practices followed by researchers and practitioners adhering to this position:

#### 3.1. *Processing instruction (structured input)*

Input processing (structured input) is a pedagogical technique proposed by VanPatten (1996). In processing instruction, learners are somehow forced to pay attention to a grammatical form to comprehend the meaning of a sentence which would not be otherwise available to them. The tasks used in processing instruction usually develop the comprehension of forms rather than the ability to produce them.

#### 3.2. *Textual enhancement (visual/typographical enhancement)*

Textual (visual or typographical) enhancement is a useful technique in which some typographical cues in the input are manipulated through highlighting techniques such as font enlarging, italicising, bold-facing, underlining, capitalising, shadowing, etc. This technique is assumed to achieve learners’ noticing of the targeted form in the input while communicating the meaning with the hope that input becomes intake (Han et al., 2008; Lee & Huang, 2008).

#### 3.3. *Interactional feedback*

Interactional feedback refers to the feedback learners receive upon producing non-target-like output during their interaction with the teacher or other learners. In this technique, a set of conversational devices such as clarification requests, comprehension checks, confirmation checks, and repetitions are used to draw the learners’ attention to ungrammatical forms in their output and make them modify their output.

#### 3.4. *Instructional conversation (prolepsis)*

Instructional conversation (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) or prolepsis refers to a pedagogical scaffolding process in which the teacher and the learners are involved in a meaning-centred interaction in order to clarify a particular form not yet internalised by the learners. In this discovery approach, the teacher does not solve the formal problem himself/herself, but leads learners to inductively come to their own understanding of that form.

#### 3.5. *Focused communicative tasks*

Focused communicative tasks, as some kind of *pushed output* (Swain, 1985) or *planned focus-on-form* (Ellis, 2001), intend to elicit the production of a specific linguistic form in the context of performing a meaning-centred communicative task. These tasks have two main features. First, the focus of the task is primarily on meaning. Second, learners are unaware that a specific form is intentionally selected as the target of elicited production.

#### 3.6. *Discourse-based approaches*

Discourse-based approaches to teaching grammatical forms, as opposed to sentence-based grammars, are based on a type of grammar known as ‘discourse grammar’ (Celce-Murcia, 2002). Discourse grammar utilises the corpus-based analysis of specific grammatical features contextualised in a large number of authentic spoken/written texts of different genres. This fruitful approach to grammar teaching offers an accessible and practical methodology which helps learners

#### 4. Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the different positions on form-meaning interaction and focus on the integrative position and the instructional techniques drawing on it. To this end, a short historical overview of the three positions on the interface issue and the pedagogical options proposed by each position were given. The first position, the *non-interface position*, underlined a *focus-on-meaning* approach and *implicit* knowledge/learning of grammatical forms. The second position, the *strong interface position*, assumed a *focus-on-forms* approach and highlighted the role of *explicit* knowledge/learning of language structures. Whereas the former fostered fluency at the expense of accuracy, the latter abandoned fluency in favour of accuracy.

Rejecting the polarised views of the non-interface and the strong interface positions, the *weak interface position* sought to carve out a middle ground. This moderate position led to the advent of a new *integrative* approach known as the *focus-on-form* instruction which combined focusing on forms and focusing on meaning, explicit and implicit knowledge/learning of grammar, and fluency and accuracy. This breakthrough has been more or less represented in findings of recent SLA research. However, the research remains in its infancy and further investigation as to effectiveness of the currently practised techniques as well as devising new pedagogical options seem to be essential.

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